

**Dramatic Incidents of Action,
Color, Thrills, Surprises and
the Girl Who Was Back in Iowa.**

THE SILENT SPRING

BY
WILL LEVINGTON
COMFORT.

A QUIET afternoon hour in Dider's Diner's barroom in Bolina. Old Mul Aker's was here with his first stock. Dider himself was present; also a tall stranger, who sat apart at a table in the shadows. This stranger didn't appear to have the remotest interest in the talk of the others, which was mainly about a former citizen of Bolina who had disappeared—a young man they called Dave, who had brought a lot of raw gold to town one morning, saying he had found a rich lode on the other side of the foothills. This young Dave had promised to let his fellow-citizens of Bolina in on diggings adjacent to his claim. He had "sold" some very rich mineral for currency of the realm and left for San Diego to get a pack and work outfit, but he hadn't been heard of in several months.

Mul Aker's now spoke: "Davey didn't look like he just come in from the mountains when he comes here with his first stock. I hear Mr. Rob Travis say in the assay office that Dave's stock don't look like no gold he's seen on this side of the border."

"Gold is gold," said Dider. "She sure is," said old Mul. "An' sure scarce and retiring by nature. But there was crummin' already done on that stuff Dave brings in, not one-penny hammer, but machine work. There's some big mines over in Mexico that transport their stuff half-leaded like that from the mountains to the mills."

"Our Davey," said Toller Dip. "You hints that he's been with a Mexican pack train, an' I had my heart all set that he had found old McConachie's lost lode over in Haunted Valley."

"I'm sayin' as what Mr. Travis says," Mul answered patiently. "Also Mr. Travis says: 'Davey Homb was in a hurry when he was here and kept pullin' up his shirt collar to cover a bullet scar in his throat.' That scar was on his gray necktie, and he had a man bein' peaked-like Davey looked."

"Then over at Bidiard's, where Mr. Travis boards, he happens to hear some one bring up the old subject of the Transcon train robbery, and how the man holdin' up the day coach was shot in the neck by a ranger from Little Ton."

"But the train gang run off the hands outside that night and there wasn't a dollar taken from the express or mail cars," said Toller Dip. "The man inside, workin' on the passengers of the day coach, didn't get away with no three jack loads of rotten rope ore."

THE tall stranger now came forward from the shadows and dimly showed the badge of a forest ranger.

"Excuse me, gentlemen," he said, his words slightly muffled and impeded. "My name is Billings. I am stationed on Little Tonop and I'd like to sit in this conversation."

"Which is accorded," said Dider.

"What sort of a looking young man was this Davey you speak of?"

"He wasn't tall exceptional," Dider began.

"Nor short, either," said Toller Dip.

"He was smooth-faced and innocent," Dider resumed. "And could look up into your face winnin' and amiable. He wasn't handsome."

"He wasn't bad-looking, either," said Toller Dip.

"Could he shoot?" Ranger Billings inquired suddenly.

"Dave Homb could shoot," said Toller Dip. "Dider, you're not forgettin' as how he knocked the last shot out of a rattler's tail in Lucas's backyard."

"The young man I have reference to could shoot," said the ranger, clearing his voice. "He wasn't tall and he wasn't short. As to his looks, amiable, I couldn't state, because he had a mask on at the time—I refer to the bandit on a Transcon day coach eastbound on the Ragged Wren grade," said the ranger.

"You was on that train?" asked Toller Dip.

"I was on that train," said the ranger. "I was in the back seat of that particular coach. The masked bandit came in from the back, pulled his pouch and kidding the passengers along as he took what they had. When he was a little less than half the way through the coach I lifted sudden from the seat and drove one shot, which he ducked successfully. Also, he fired back, making it advisable for me to roll behind the last seat."

"Then you kidded him from behind the seat you had clim' back of," said Toller Dip. "That is, according to the papers."

"Which is correct," said the ranger. "Neither of us had drawn blood by this time. I was figuring to get him before he got to me, and the bandit was figuring the same. His fingers worked out. He didn't wait for me to begin. This buzzes a little when I talk," indicating his upper lip, "isn't a birthmark. It was from one of those shots, which he ducked successfully. Also, he fired back, making it advisable for me to roll behind the last seat."

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BILLINGS LISTENED—LOOKED DOWN TOWARD THE SPRING AND LISTENED. BILLINGS ALSO STUDIED THE MYSTERIOUS THING CALLED FIDELITY.

"What you goin' to do about it, Ranger?" Toller Dip inquired.

"That train robber spoiled me," the ranger answered slowly. "I feel called to be interested in his case."

"I wouldn't like to be Dave Homb, not with that fellow after me," mused Toller Dip, after the ranger had backed out of the barroom.

Three weeks later Dider Dreir stared at the front page of yesterday's paper from Los Angeles, and what he saw there caused him to announce to those present:

"Gents, you'll sure have to excuse me abrupt. I'm takin' the stage for Pasadena in exactly twelve minutes." On the same day Ranger Billings sat at the door of his station as the sun went down and stared away off toward the sea. The legs of his chair dug into the disintegrated granite of Little Tonop's crest, over 8,000 feet high, and commanded a hundred miles of surrounding scenery. Back and a little north Big Top himself hunched up nearly 2,000 feet higher.

Billings had always had a laugh at life, but the laugh was gone. His upper lip was a broken thing. It didn't grin when the rest of his face did. Also there was a girl in Iowa waiting to be sent for, but no girl could live with that sitting posture at her table—not on a ranger's salary.

The ranger opened yesterday's paper, which his assistant had just brought up from the post office. After one long look at the front page he called:

"Put on what you've got handy, Jake. I'm ridin' down trail before dark to get a stage for Pasadena, where they need me tomorrow, whether they know it or not. They caught Roger Dryden in New York five days ago, and he arrives in Pasadena tonight."

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horse was the kid's. The other belonged to Dreir's housekeeper. "We hadn't ridden far before I had to stop and tie the kid onto his saddle. I had to tie up his neck, too. Later I heard him whispering—whispering for me to go on, that he was done for. When I stopped a little while after that he had made good on those last words. I couldn't get the lariat loose, so I left him, saddle and all. But his horse followed mine, loose."

"The body was never found," the ranger said.

"It was dark, a couple of hours before daybreak. It was a hobby-ho I left him in—like an arrow."

"Could you go there again?"

"Only by luck," Dryden said quietly. "I didn't know the country."

BILLINGS arose to depart. Roger Dryden's hearing was set for four the same afternoon in Judge Baker's court, on the sixth floor of the Sequoia building. Dider Dreir was there, with a number of deputies, a court clerk or two, Ranger Billings and four or five men from the hills. The proceedings were rushed through. The ranger scarcely listened. The slight, natty figure of the bank robber standing between Drinkwater and another deputy held his eyes. Now he saw Roger Dryden slowly turn his way.

Presently, just behind him, a body whipped up from the seat, and a voice above his head called quietly:

"Come on, pal. I've got every gent in the house covered."

It was a voice that Ranger Billings knew, that kidding, bantering voice he had heard in the day coach of the Transcon train. A hand was laid on his shoulder, and the same voice said:

"Be good, Ranger. I always did like your style, and would have to have to put you on sick report again."

Billings saw Drinkwater and the deputy on the other side of Dryden with hands raised. Dryden ducked under the arms of the two deputies and was running low up the aisle. The train robbers' voice finished a sentence for Billings alone:

"Not a man in the house but I'd rather puncture than quiet, Ranger. Let's keep this quiet and gentlemanly—only rapid."

It was so rapid, in fact, that Ranger Billings didn't lift from his daze until

it was over and he heard Dider Dreir's housekeeper close the door. "Our own little Davey of Bolina—"

Dryden and his rescuer had slipped softly out of the double doors into the hall. A roar then from the deputies, a rushing forward to find that the doors were fastened. They gave on their floor bolts, but the outer knobs were held together. The entire body of men in the courtroom rushed back through Judge Baker's private office and into the hall by another door, to find that David and his Jonathan had caught an elevator down.

"Yes, sir," Dider Dreir was saying, back in Bolina the next morning. "It was a hand-out that fastened the door—a steel handcuff slipped over the two knobs and locked."

"They'll never get out without the other," Toller Dip remarked impressively.

The morning papers from the city had given themselves full-heartedly to the story of Roger Dryden's delivery by his pal. The old story of the Transcon hold-up was retold.

A real man hunt was on. A thousand dollars reward was posted for Dave Homb, and fifteen hundred for the twice-escaped bank robber of Pasadena. The two getaways of Dryden and Homb, their adamant loyalty to each other and the novelty of Dryden's second capture, through a face specialist, furnished details of a big summer story from a newspaper standpoint. Billings had taken part in the man hunt at first, but Drinkwater and his sort didn't wear well.

The ranger was mainly riding alone, these later days, and one of his rides took him to a ridge overlooking Haunted Valley. Far below was an old cabin built by a miner named McConachie, forty years before. A rumor connected with the valley, so persistently as to become tradition, was that somewhere about was a lode of gold, wonderfully rich. Just as persistently, however, was the story that old McConachie's ghost was wont to return.

BILLINGS had been on this ridge before, and had happened upon a silent spring. He had counted on finding it again this night, but dark closed in and he was forced to make a dry camp. In the morning gray the position of the spring opened up like a mathematical example one has

struggled over the night before. Billings was letting himself down a ravine toward it, when he heard voices. Two men, at least, were on their way up to the spring, as he was on his way down. One of the man-hunting parties, he thought. His left foot darted out to stop a small boulder that had started to slide, and in that position he stood stock still. He would wait until they filled their canteens and vamoosed. It was still half dark in the bottom of the ravine. Minutes passed before a voice reached him:

"Sure. I can make it. Back at dark, with coffee, beans and pork. You can lie up safe here. No one comes to this spring."

A weak murmur of a voice answered, and then a laugh from the first—a laugh Billings had come to know.

"I'll take a chance. . . Not on your life. I won't stop for a big feed over there in Calliente. I'll be a hurry-in' back here to our own poison-oak tree for our party. So long, pal."

A full minute after that, Ranger Billings reached his hand slowly down and picked up the loose boulder under his left foot. He placed it safely on a ledge where it couldn't slide, and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. His enemies had been delivered into his hands—twenty-five hundred, counting both rewards, and the old score settled. . . . Dryden lying up, starting to death—Dave Homb forced out of cover for food!

Twenty minutes later, Billings was less than forty feet lower down from the point where he had first heard voices, but he knew now exactly where the man lay, like a stag in his horn, deep in a brush of ferns twenty feet lower still. He waited for a ray of actual sunlight to penetrate the ferns. From time to time he heard a moaning breath.

"Hello, Dryden," he said at last, as close as one in the same room.

"Don't draw, young fellow. It's suicide to draw. What's the matter—hurt, hungry?"

"Lost, Mister—lost!" came a sudden wail.

Billings chuckled maudlinly. Dryden still had a shift to work to cover Dave Homb's tracks.

"Now that's too bad," Billings said indignantly. "Excuse me for being suspicious, but I note that you reached for a six-shooter."

"I didn't mean to," Dryden said, as he slipped the gun into his pocket.

"I'm takin' you up the ravine a piece where my horse is. I'll have a whole lot of fun with you up there, know most.